

What does the Iowa Office of the State Medical Examiner do?

The Iowa Office of the State Medical Examiner (IOSME) provides support, guidance, education, consultation, and training to County Medical Examiners and Investigators (CME-Is), who are responsible for investigating violent, suspicious, and unexpected natural deaths. We provide forensic autopsy and investigative services when requested to do so by county medical examiners and law enforcement agencies. Our mission is to establish credibility in death investigation in a system that will operate efficiently and serve the needs of the citizens of Iowa.

Our goal is to assist the county medical examiners and law enforcement agencies in determining a scientifically unbiased and logical cause and manner of death. The information gathered during a forensic death investigation and subsequent autopsy is critical to many civil court cases and murder trials. This information will also help us provide answers to assist you in understanding your loved one’s death.

What is a Medical Examiner and County Medical Examiner Investigator?

A County Medical Examiner (CME) is a physician licensed within the state of Iowa and appointed by their respective County Board of Supervisors to conduct investigations necessary to determine the cause and manner of death of individuals who die under violent, sudden, and unexpected circumstances (Iowa Code 331.802 (3)). CME-Is are trained death investigators who assist the CME in performing these duties.

What is an autopsy?

An autopsy is a systematic examination of the organs of a body to determine the cause and manner of death and to assess any pathologic changes that may be present. A complete forensic autopsy begins with a thorough review of the decedent’s medical history if that information is available. The body is then examined both externally and internally in order to discover and document disease or injury. Specimens of vital organs and body fluids are tested for drugs and alcohol. In cases of death resulting from violence, evidence may be collected and later examined by the state crime laboratory.

The autopsy and ancillary tests usually do not delay the release of the body to the next-of-kin. However, the final results and completion of the autopsy report may take 60-90 days.

Who can request that a forensic autopsy be performed?

County Medical Examiners, County Attorneys, and the State Medical Examiner have the statutory authority and obligation to request that a forensic autopsy be performed in cases where death is suspected to have arisen from violent, suspicious, and unexpected circumstances (Iowa Code 331.802 (4)).

Who pays for the forensic autopsy when one is requested?

The family is not charged for a forensic autopsy when one is requested as outlined above. However, when an individual’s death does not fall under the County Medical Examiner’s jurisdiction, the family may arrange for a private autopsy. The costs and arrangements for private autopsies are the responsibility of the requesting party. The IOSME cannot perform private autopsies per Iowa Code.

May a family refuse a forensic autopsy?

No. Forensic autopsies are done to answer medicolegal questions that are deemed in the “public interest” or to address a question of law.

The IOSME and CMEs recognize that an individual’s religious beliefs may be contrary to the performance of an autopsy. Both entities are open to discussion to try to accommodate the family’s wishes and to fulfill the legal obligation presented by your loved one’s death. Please consult with our office or the county medical examiner’s office to share your concerns.

Who can obtain copies of the autopsy report and death certificate?

The cause and manner of death is a matter of public record and can be released, unless release of such information will hinder or harm an ongoing criminal investigation (Iowa Code 22.7(41)). The remainder of

the information contained within an autopsy report is confidential and treated as a medical record. This information is available to the immediate and legal next-of-kin and to those with written permission from the immediate and legal next-of-kin. Others who may receive copies of the autopsy report include treating physicians, law enforcement agencies investigating the death, and county attorneys.

How do I get a copy of the autopsy report and death certificate?

The final autopsy report is available to the immediate and legal next-of-kin upon receipt of a written request; there is no charge for this report. To request a copy of the autopsy report, fill out the attached “Family Request for Autopsy Report” form, detach it from this pamphlet, and mail or fax it as indicated on the form. You may also submit a handwritten or typed request. Please include your full name, address, telephone number, your relationship to the decedent, and his or her date of death.

The funeral director that you have chosen to handle the final arrangements can assist you in getting copies of the death certificate. There is a charge of \$15.00 per certificate. Certified copies of the death certificate may be obtained from the Iowa Department of Public Health Bureau of Health Statistics (515-281-4944). *Our office cannot issue copies of death certificates.*

What if I have questions pertaining to the content of the autopsy report?

If you have any questions or concerns about the autopsy report, please call us at 515-725-1400. We will be happy to discuss with you the contents of the autopsy report.

How does the Medical Examiner help families?

Once the cause and manner of death have been determined, the Medical Examiner signs the death certificate for those cases falling under their jurisdiction.

Immediate next-of-kin must have properly completed death certificates to claim insurance, receive government benefits, settle the decedent’s estate, and pursue any civil or criminal legal action.

FAMILY REQUEST FOR AUTOPSY REPORT

Autopsy results may be released to the immediate next-of-kin according to Iowa Code 22.7, item 41.

Name of Requestor _____ Relationship to Deceased _____
Name of Deceased _____ Date of Death _____
Address to Send Report (For privacy, reports cannot be faxed or emailed) _____
Street: _____
City/State/Zip: _____ Phone (Required) _____
(Please include Area Code)

Please mail or Fax this form to:
Iowa Office of the State Medical Examiner
2250 South Ankeny Blvd.
Ankeny, IA 50023-9093
FAX: 515-725-1414

You will receive a phone call from our office verifying receipt of your request. At that time, our staff may request additional information in order to verify your status of next-of-kin.

Medical benefits provided by a forensic autopsy include a medical determination of the cause of death, recognition of unsuspected natural causes of death, the identification of public health hazards, and sometimes the identification of an undiagnosed hereditary medical condition.

Why is a forensic autopsy necessary if the cause of death seems obvious, such as a gunshot wound?

A complete autopsy examination can help determine details necessary for determining the manner of death and provide information that may need to be presented in court. For example, details in an autopsy report may include determination of direction of the wound, extent of injury, number of wounds, and range of fire (distance from muzzle to victim). Specimens of bodily fluids and tissue are acquired during the autopsy and retained for testing of drugs and alcohol or other diagnostic medical testing or research as needed.

What do I do next when a loved one dies?

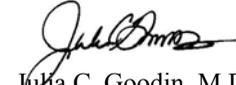
The first thing you need to do is take care of yourself. A lot of information will be shared with you, and you will need to make several decisions. The following is a suggested list to help guide you and your family through the medicolegal process:

- 1) When notified of a loved one's death, involve your family, friends, and clergy for support and comfort. They will be able to assist you in making sense of this tragic and sometimes sudden news.
- 2) You will need to select a funeral home to assist you in making funeral arrangements and to coordinate the final disposition of your loved one's remains.
- 3) Once you have chosen a funeral home, the funeral director will make arrangements to pick up and transport your loved one's remains back to the funeral home following the autopsy.
- 4) Keep track of any and all business cards given to you by law enforcement, county medical examiner, ambulance, and funeral home personnel.

- 5) Start a file or folder to collect all paperwork and information that will be shared with you as a result of your loved one's passing.
- 6) Finally, remember to check in on yourself. Stress can come into one's life quickly and unexpectedly. Do not be afraid to use resources available to you in your community.

The Iowa Office of the State Medical Examiner hopes that the information contained within this pamphlet is useful and practical for you and your family. Again, if our office can be of any assistance to you and your family, please contact the number listed on the front of this brochure.

Sincerely,



Julia C. Goodin, M.D.
State Medical Examiner

Iowa Office of the State Medical Examiner



Information for Families

Julia C. Goodin, M.D.
State Medical Examiner

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The death of a loved one can cause tremendous stress and sorrow. We hope the information in this brochure will assist you during the grieving process and help answer questions about the autopsy process and the medicolegal system.